WASHINGTON TIMES
28 February 1985

THE RETURN OF COMMANDER ZERO

By Glenn Garvin
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Given a choice, Eden Pastora would rather be crawling on his belly through the muck of the jungle along the San Juan River, blasting away with his automatic rifle at the *piricuacos* — rabid dogs, the name Nicaraguan rebels call government soldiers — who every day send patrols probing toward his headquarters. There is little food there, bullets are hard to come by, and Nicaragua's relentless winter rains make the jungle a hell of mud and mosquitoes. But still it is a clean, simple kind of a fight. They shoot at you, you shoot at them. They want to take the village, you want to hold it. There is a symmetry to it, a decent manliness. It's not like Washington.

In Washington, Pastora cuts off his beard. ("That's for the mosquitoes, up in the mountains.) He takes off the jungle fatigues and puts on a leisure suit. (But on his jacket he still wears the small red star that denotes *commandante*.) He can't bring his gun, not even the little .22 caliber derringer he keeps in his pocket in Nicaragua. ("The FBI would pick me up and put me in jail if I carried it. I'm afraid of the FBI.") He must spend his days trudging through a jungle more dense and unpredictable and treacherous than anything in Nicaragua; that is, the one on Capitol Hill. By day he skirmishes with politicians; by night, journalists. ("They are always catching me unprepared. Ambushed by *reporters*. It is a new thing.")

Eden Pastora is a good soldier, no, a *brilliant* soldier. He once took the whole National Palace in Managua hostage, complete with the Nicaraguan congress inside. His 25 soldiers walked away with half a million dollars in ransom, and they didn't suffer a single casualty. As a politician, well, his gifts are smaller. "Some people say he is naive, some say he is stupid, and some say he is crazy," explains one Nicaraguan, and this is a man who likes him. His enemies are much less charitable.

But now, like it or not (mostly not), Eden Pastora must spend almost as much time politicking as he does soldiering. He must deliver a message. It's a simple one —

"Here I am. Do I look OK? I'm alive, right? Not dead, not crippled, not sick." He smiles, rather grimly, and adds: "And not run out of the country, either."

Most of the congressmen whose offices he has been haunting this week are surprised when a fit, trim and relatively cheerful Eden Pastora appears. For the past eight months almost all the news out of the southern part of Nicaragua, where he and his guerrilla force called ARDE (Revolutionary Democratic Alliance) fight their war against the country's Marxist rulers, has been bad. Political wrangling. Logistical problems. Assassination attempts. Military catastrophes.

Eden Pastora is a man accustomed to sudden and malign shifts of fortune. For 20 years he was the military pride of the Sandinista guerrillas as they battled to unseat the ruling Somoza family; his nom de guerre, Commander Zero, was to Nicaraguans what the name Che Guevera was to Cubans. But after less than two years as vice-minister for defense in the new regime, he decided the new rulers were no better than the old, and went back into the jungle to fight again. For nearly all his life he has been leading underfed, underequipped and underexperienced troops against a militarily superior force.

But eight months ago Pastora encountered a series of reverses that were disastrous even by his severe standards. First there was a bitter split in the political leadership of ARDE, his rebel group. Pastora retained the loyalty of all the troops, but that was about all; the faction that left took the money and most of the supplies.

When he called a press conference to announce the split, an assassin smuggled in a bomb that killed five guerrillas and reporters and riddled his legs with shrapnel, forcing him to go to a hospital in Venezuela to recuperate for a month. While he was out of action, the Nicaraguan army rampaged through the territory his rebels had controlled, and ejected them from much of it. Costa Rica, which had offered discreet sanctuary to the rebels, suddenly reversed course. Officials arrested a number of Pastora's men and seized their equipment.

"Yes, yes, there were some bad times," Pastora agrees. "They [the Sandinistas] sent 3,000 men against the position we held. We had to abandon it. When they made us leave the area, the media all over the world made a great deal of noise about how we were tossed out. When we went back a month later and took it back, the media didn't say a thing. They didn't say a thing about the 50,000 rounds of ammunition the enemy was forced to abandon to us, or the 200 grenades and mortars, or the 46 rockets. Nobody mentioned it."

Now, Pastora says — and independent reports from Nicaragua confirm — his troops control 10,000 square kilometers of the country's southern territory, along the border with Costa Rica. (The northernmost point his troops occupy is the village of Corroso, which the Sandinista army has attacked repeatedly for several months. Enrique Smith, a well-known Sandinista commander, was killed in a battle there recently.) Pastora's men operate even further north than that, launching hit-and-run guerrilla operations almost daily.

"The fighting goes on every day. Around Rama, in the Nueva Guinea colonies, at Elmendro," he says, ticking off villages whose names will never be well-known here, but whose names are writ large in blood in Nicaragua. "The problem is that if you have an action where only one or two men are killed, nobody wants to write about that."

That is why, even though his men are under constant pressure, Pastora has come to the United States.

"I've been very surprised here at the disinformation that floats around in Washington, among people in general and even in the government," he says. "They've really twisted the image of the Sandinistas. I can understand why they twist my image, call me erratic and so forth, but not why they twist what I'm doing.

"They say there's 400 or 500 men with me — maybe 2,000 at the most. I have *10,000 men*. Seven thousand of them have no arms, it is true . . . But that can change if I can get some money."

Money, money, money. Even a guerrilla army needs it: for clothing, for food, for guns and bullets. In early January, Pastora had all of $60 in the rebel bank account. Since then he's raised $50,000 with a series of radio marathons on Spanish-language stations that serve Miami's Cuban exile community (Fidel Castro's estranged sister kicked in $1,000 herself), but that won't last out the month.

A more skilled politician would be afloat in dollars — the U.S. Congress already has passed out something on the order of $80 million to anti-Sandinistas — but Pastora is no diplomat.

"Oh, I know," he sighs. "I'm always getting into trouble. A U.S. citizen told me this — he said they couldn't give me help because if I got help I would overthrow the Nicaraguan government. And the laws of the United States forbid this, he said. So I asked, 'In that case, how did you overthrow [Chilean Marxist President Salvador] Allende?' He said to me, 'See, that's what's the matter with you. That's why we don't like you.' "

Hmm. A "U.S. citizen"? Did this citizen work for the government?

Pastora giggles. "Not exactly. He was sort of liaison between us and the money. He was — a force." More giggles. "I think I can't tell you exactly who it was. I think it would be *dangerous* to tell you exactly who he was."

For Eden Pastora, this represents an amazing degree of tact. Ordinarily he would come right out and say he was talking about a CIA agent. In recent weeks Pastora has publicly referred to the CIA as "a son of a b----," a "dark force," and suggested that the agency has "black hands, that, if you touch them, you end up with manure." Sometimes he uses words other than manure.

His troubles with the CIA stem back to the same old problem, money. The CIA has been the conduit for the not-so-covert U.S. aid to Nicaraguan rebels. But the agency always has favored Pastora's rivals rather than ARDE.

Three major rebel forces operate in Nicaragua. In the north, there is the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), which is loosely allied with a group of Miskito Indian guerrillas known as Misurasata. In the south there is Pastora's group, ARDE. FDN and ARDE have never been able to forge an alliance and in fact have sometimes seemed almost as hostile to one another as they have to the Sandinistas.

The northern rebels have always gotten more American support. But Sr. Pastora's group did collect between $300,000 and $500,000 a month in laundered money from the American CIA in late 1983 and early 1984. "People would come to Eden and say, 'I'm going to give you some money, but I don't want you to ask me where I got it, OK?' " says one associate. "And he never asked."

But last year the CIA, exasperated by Pastora's refusal to join an alliance with the rebels in the north, cut him off. "I haven't received anything in a year, not even a pair of boots, not even a bullet," he says. "There has been no official help from the United States. In fact, the U.S. government has blocked assistance from other sources.

"With no money for supplies, we've been obliged to fight a guerrilla type of war which is very different than the war in the north . . . We're running out of bullets. Every day the position is more difficult for us. The guerrilla war is really very cheap. But there are sacrifices in it."

What he would like is a flat $1 million a month. "A million, yeah, that would do it," he sighs. "When you have 10,000 men in your organization, that's an army. If they'd give us enough arms, we'd overthrow the government in Managua."

The thought of marching into Managua, as he did in June 1979, electrifies Eden Pastora. He begins pounding his fist in his hand. "I'll tell you what we need!" he shouts. "It's simple. To demonstrate to the Sandinista army — to show them *Commandante* Zero with good boots, a nice uniform, a gun well-greased and with lots of bullets. But as long as I'm out here screaming in desperation, it's difficult. The people in a country move toward the winners. They don't commit suicide. We're the only ones in the whole world who fight against communism without logistical support."

If Pastora talks often about marching into Managua, it's understandable; it is a goal that has obsessed him his entire adult life. If it sounds like absurd hyperbole — that his little band of teenagers and old men, armed with squirrel rifles and World War I Mausers, could beat a Cuban-trained army of 60,000, with reserves three times that, which has tanks and gunships at its disposal — then remember that it must have seemed equally absurd when he was a Sandinista, facing the same odds against the ruling Somoza dynasty.

But he did march into Managua — or, rather, drove. He entered the city in the same jeep with *Los Nueves*, The Nine, the national directorate. When they all went to the National Palace that day to appear at a rally of 200,000 delirious Nicaraguans, the mob chanted only one name: Zero!

Now, when the Sandinistas publish photographs taken that day, Pastora's face has been air brushed away. He never existed. A recent book, "Nicaragua For Beginners," published by Mexican leftists who admire the Sandinistas, even says the famous operation in which the Nicaraguan congress was taken hostage was commanded by a woman named Dora Maria Tellez. It does not mention Pastora.

"I know they call me traitor," he shrugs. "It doesn't matter." But it must matter, a little. Pastora's father was murdered by Anastasio Somoza's National Guard when Eden was only 7.

The next 35 years of Pastora's life were directed by a single motive: vengeance. He went underground in 1959, and soon after launched his first against-all-odds attack: 35 rebels against a National Guard barracks of 300 or more.

In 1970, when the Sandinistas were broke — almost as broke as Pastora is now — and discouraged, he came up with a plan to seize the National Palace with 25 rebels disguised in National Guard uniforms. It took eight years to convince the political leadership to let him mount the operation, which in the end was one of the most magnificently successful military operations of the 20th century. It captured the world's imagination; and a year later, the Sandinistas captured Managua.

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He was vice-minister of defense in the new regime, but soon soured on the revolution as more and more foreign advisers from communist countries poured into Nicaragua, taking over the economy, the defense, and even the political organization. Finally he left.

Now his old pals in the national directorate would like to kill him. They tried to slip a bomb into his headquarters in Costa Rica in 1983, but it went off prematurely. Then there was the assassination attempt last year, although Pastora has so many enemies at so many points on the ideological compass that it's impossible to say which one was behind the bombing.

It took place on a rainy May day. About 15 journalists had traveled from Costa Rica by boat for two hours into Nicaragua to attend his press conference. "I had just started talking," he recalls. "It sounded at first as if a flashbulb was exploding. I really didn't understand what was happening ... I even thought for a moment that a hand grenade of one of my companions had exploded. Then, where I heard the screaming, I thought we were being attacked."

His legs were full of shrapnel, and he had burns over 40 percent of his body. He thinks it was a piece of remarkable luck that he had shaved off his beard two days before. "It was long, very long, four times longer than yours," he says, gesturing at a hirsute reporter. "If I hadn't cut it off I would have died. It would have caught on fire."

Not so lucky were an American newspaper reporter and a Costa Rican television cameraman, who died before they could be evacuated. Wire service reports that day said that Pastora was transported to Costa Rica within minutes via helicopter, while the 31 injured had to wait for hours before leaving in canoes. Five of the wounded died.

Pastora may laugh or shrug when he is called a traitor, but this accusation about the helicopter disturbs him deeply.

"When the bomb went off, I stayed on my feet," he says, his face set in grave lines. "I was the only one to remain standing ... My first order was to take care of the wounded. The second was to prepare the boats. And the third was that no one who wasn't wounded should leave.

"I didn't leave until noon the next day. I was the last of the wounded to go. Nevertheless, some journalist said I left in a helicopter. I still don't know why. The helicopter was conspicuous in its absence. It was never there, not at all."

Ironically, in 26 years of jungle fighting, this wound incurred at a press conference was Pastora's first. "It's been close to me several times, but this is the first blood I've ever lost," he says. He still doesn't know who hid the bomb in a box of photographic equipment: "You tell me ... There is no evidence."

Despite the serious wounds, Pastora was back in the field in about a month. And there he has stayed ever since. He walks normally, and says there are no lingering effects of his injuries. The burns on his face left no scars; he has the same rugged, handsome looks as always — as though someone in Hollywood got a casting call for a Central American revolutionary, and rushed him right over.

In fact, Eden Pastora has always been a popular man with the ladies. A reporter finally summons the nerve to ask a question that has troubled him for years: Does he really have 22 children? How did he ever have any time to fight?

Pastora roars with laughter. "That's *very* indiscreet of you to ask," he says, nodding mirthfully. "Between combats, we all have our, um, *compañeros* we look out for."

The two eldest sons, Alvaro and Panfilo (named after Pastora's murdered father), pack rifles now; they have joined the revolution. "I'm proud of them," says Pastora, beaming in a most un-hardbitten-guerrilla-like fashion. "They're real men. And they're fighting as foot soldiers, not as *commandantes*. They fight right beside the peasants; they don't get any favors."

Insulting, foul-mouthed and unpredictably independent as he can be, Eden Pastora could probably get back into the CIA's good graces without much trouble. It would take one simple act: he must agree to an alliance with the FDN rebels in the north. But, to hear Eden Pastora tell it, that's about like saying that Walter Mondale could be president if he'd just switch parties.

"For moral reasons, I can't appear with these colonels who were with the Somoza forces," he says. "I cannot and I will not."

He is referring to the fact that a few of the FDN's military leaders — including the commander-in-chief, Enrique Bermudez — were officers in Somoza's National Guard. By the end of Somoza's regime, the Guard had come to represent the dictator's most brutal excesses. When the Sandinistas took over in 1979, they imprisoned hundreds of the Guardsmen without trial and drove the rest out of the country.

To many observers, Pastora's insistence on purging the former Guardsmen from command positions in the FDN seems unfair. After all, Pastora himself is a former Sandinista. If the Guard must answer for the crimes of Anastasio Somoza, then why shouldn't Pastora — and most of his lieutenants, who are also former Sandinistas — be held responsible for everything the Sandinistas have done?

"I'll tell you what the difference is," Pastora snaps. "The former Sandinistas, these people are voluntarily leaving positions of power after four or five years to do this, making sacrifices because they see that the Sandinistas are wrong. Whereas the Somocistas never left voluntarily. They were thrown out ... In 45 years they never went against the Somoza tyranny. And they're still not against it. They still use the old ways. The FDN has never presented a POW to the International Red Cross."

Pastora refers to the acknowledged policy of the FDN of executing some captured Sandinista soldiers. Pastora says he, by contrast, has turned over 450 POWs to the Red Cross.

"You must understand that this is both a moral problem and a political problem," he argues. "The FDN has a commander named Capt. [Ricardo] Lau. He committed many atrocities under Somoza. He killed and tortured. When the bodies of his prisoners were recovered, they had been castrated. In the cities of Jinotepe and Dirimba, they still remember this. He was chief of national security there right up until the end [of Somoza's regime]. If he were brought into this area to lead the fighting, it would turn everyone in the area into the hands of the Sandinistas ...

"These things are easily manipulated by the Sandinistas. They have the televison stations in Nicaragua, they control the news. And they have used these things to make it look like Somoza is coming back."

Pastora says he has offered, four times, to join forces with the FDN if the group will demote the former Guardsmen. And, he adds, he has offered to resign himself if that's the quid pro quo. But the FDN won't budge, and Pastora believes the CIA has been encouraging a stand-tough policy.

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"It's just a matter of three or four men," he says, sighing again. "If three or four would resign, that would do it. It's nothing. It's [bleep]. The CIA is foolish, very foolish."

He has other problems. In 1983, he bought a dozen aircraft with money looted from the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington by a defecting ambassador. But most of them were taken by opposition factions during the political maneuvering last spring, and several have found their way into the hands of the rival FDN. And he has trouble getting what few supplies he can obtain to his men. In recent months, both Honduras and Costa Rica have detained or seized planes unloading food and weapons for Pastora's forces. That is an overwhelming problem, since he can hardly fly them in directly to Managua.

But he is most worried by what he sees as a new current of thought in the United States that counsels negotiation with the Sandinistas. "They seem to want us to coexist with the Sandinistas," he complains. "That's not possible. I'd negotiate with the communists if I had a strong position. And if there were preconditions — like a free press, so all the people could follow what's going on.

"But I can't negotiate as long as we've been invaded by 3,000 Cuban military people and their colleagues. I can't negotiate as long as I have no supplies, because I have no position of strength; I can't give anything away. And anyway — negotiate what? Negotiate freedom?"

So, on Monday or Tuesday he will go back *adentro* — inside. He'll put back on his fatigues, let the beard grow, slip the little derringer back in his pocket. "In battle, you need a big gun, of course," he explains. "But you have to let the little ones participate too."

Some of his men will ask him how it went, did the *norteamericanos* do anything to help. He will shrug. It is too hard to read American politics; you have to wait and see. Maybe some of the men will ask him the same question that Americans like to ask: How much longer will the war go on?

"That depends on the logistical support I have," he shrugs. "And there's no sign yet that I have *any*. So we just keep fighting a guerrilla war, down to the last bullet."

He jumps up, thrusting a fist into the air. "If I just had 3 million bullets," he shouts, "I'd put a new government in Managua." He falls silent, but there is a light in his face. *Commandante Cero* is dreaming, once more, about marching into Managua.